

real life and authors that I'm a fan of. I think I would have been a lot more inspired to write if I knew I'd be able to compare my daily writing stats against the real-time stats of my favorite fiction writers—Curtis Sittenfeld, Scott Westerfeld, Cory Doctorow, and Emily Giffin.

Any project or challenging hobby that we're working on that we want to see through to completion would benefit from more gamelike feedback and ambient support. We may be looking at a future in which everything we do can be "plus": Cooking+, Reading+, Music+.

Maybe even . . . Social Life+?

That's the idea behind Foursquare, a social networking application designed to motivate players to lead a more interesting social life.

Foursquare

The premise of Foursquare is simple: you'll be happier if you get out of the house more and spend more time face-to-face with your friends.

Created by independent New York City-based developers Dennis Crowley and Naveen Selvadurai, Foursquare takes its name from the classic red-rubber-ball playground game. To participate in Foursquare, you simply log in to the mobile phone application whenever you show up somewhere public that you deem fun, then tell the system where you are. That's called a "check-in," and you might find yourself checking in from a restaurant, bar, café, music venue, museum, or wherever else you like to go. Whenever you check in, Foursquare then sends real-time alerts to your friends so they can join you if they're free and in the neighborhood. It also lets you know if any of your friends are already nearby, in case you want to meet up with them. Most importantly, Foursquare keeps track of where you've been, when, and who you've checked in with, if they're playing Foursquare, too. By mid-2010, more than a million people were tracking and sharing data about their social lives using the Foursquare system. And more than three-quarters of those users were checking in thirty or more times each month.¹²

Out of all this data, Foursquare produces a series of online metrics about your social life: how often you go out, how many different places you visit, how many different people you spend time with each week, and how frequently you visit your favorite spots. On their own, these metrics aren't that interesting. They're just data, a way to quantify what you're already doing. What really makes Foursquare engaging is the challenge and reward system built around the data.

The most popular Foursquare feature is a competitive challenge called The Mayor. The rules read: "If you've got more check-ins than anyone else at a particular place, we deem you 'The Mayor' of that place. But once someone else comes along who has checked in more times than you, they then steal the 'Mayor' title back from you." As soon as you become mayor, Foursquare sends an announcement to your friends congratulating you. Even better, some bars and restaurants have set up special deals for whoever happens to be mayor at any given time. The Marsh Café in San Francisco, for example, lets the current mayor drink for free. Of course, this is also a smart move on the part of the café—players have extra incentive to bring their friends there nightly to try to achieve or hold on to the mayor status, boosting business throughout the week. It's also a good example of how traditional brick-and-mortar companies might be able to augment their services by more actively taking part in this popular reality-based game. Currently, hundreds of venues—from the Sacramento Zoo to a Wendy's fast-food restaurant in the student union at the University of North Carolina Charlotte—offer deals or freebies for Foursquare players.

Why do people love the idea of becoming the mayor? Because trying to become mayor of your favorite city spots gives you a chance to keep doing something you already love, but do it more. It gives you an excuse to spend as much time as possible at the places that make you happiest. And when you notice someone else vying for your mayor status, you get an instant friendly rival, motivating you to visit your favorite places more often, the same way a Nike+ challenger pushes you to run faster and longer.

Foursquare is also a personal achievement system, consisting of virtual tro-

phies and badges. Trophies automatically unlock in your profile when you celebrate checking in to your tenth, twenty-fifth, fiftieth, and hundredth different venues in a single city. In order to earn these trophies, you can't just be content with being the mayor at one place. You have to venture outside your usual spots and expand your social horizons. You can also earn badges like the Foodie badge, earned by checking in to Zagat-rated restaurants in New York, San Francisco, Chicago, and other major cities, or the Entourage badge for checking in at the same time and place as ten or more of your Foursquare friends.

In the end, what makes a Foursquare social life better than your regular social life is the simple fact that to do well in Foursquare, you have to enjoy yourself more. You have to frequent your favorite places more often, try things you've never tried before, go places you've never been, and meet up more often with friends whom you might not ordinarily make time to see in person. In other words, it's not a game that rewards you for what you're already doing. It's a game that rewards you for doing new things, and making a better effort to be social.

There's one more significant benefit to adding compelling stats to your social life. Because players want their statistics to be as accurate (and impressive) as possible, they're more likely to remember to check in and send status updates about where they are. That makes it easier for their friends to find them, and therefore more likely to make plans to see them.

Ultimately, the real reward of seeing friends more often and breaking outside your routine has nothing to do with virtual badges or social life points or online bragging rights. The real rewards are all the positive emotions you are feeling, like discovery and adventure; the new experiences you're having, like hearing more live music and tasting more interesting food; and the social connections you're strengthening by being around people you like more often. Foursquare doesn't replace these rewards. Instead, it draws your attention to them.

Some people, of course, are natural social butterflies or nightlife adventurers. For others—workaholics, homebodies, introverts—getting out and doing something new is no small feat, especially when there are so many compelling reasons to stay in our own living rooms.

There's a popular gamer T-shirt that shows an Xbox Live-style badge of a door ajar with these words alongside: "Achievement unlocked: Left the house."¹³ It's a joke, but it also speaks to the real challenges of trying to lead a meaningful, balanced life in the nonvirtual world. As we struggle to find the right balance between virtual and real-life adventures, a game like Foursquare can nudge us in the right direction and help us put our best efforts where we can reap the most satisfying rewards: back in the real world, with the help of a good game.